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Seeds of Trauma in Sterile Soil

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Trauma in "The Bluest Eye"

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Trauma narratives illuminate the reader's understanding of individual and cultural aspects of severely shocking mental, emotional, and physical experiences. These works explicate social and psychological plights within war, domestic violence, rape, poverty, colonization and systemic oppression. Too, these narratives aid in expanding the reader's empathetic senses, as writers approach traumatic works as a collective consciousness. Trauma narratives explore the gap between the reader and the subject's experiences, thus allowing the readers to position themselves within the subject's context. The contemporary American writer, Toni Morrison, utilizes the African-American experience throughout her works to bridge this gap. Morrison's "*The Bluest Eye*" depicts myriad traumatic African-American experiences through the trope of sterile American soil. Within this novel, Morrison surveys domestic violence, incestuous rape, and systemic racism. The effects and signs of trauma are not limited to the specific events that transpire within the novel, but these signs transcend their momentary occurrence and project themselves into Morrison's prose, her characters, and our societal structures.

The general consensus of literary criticism surrounding "*The Bluest Eye*" deeply examines the appearance of racism through education and popular culture. More specifically, these criticisms analyze the struggles young black girls like Pecola Breedlove are met with in learning their self-worth through these means. Critics like Sam Vásquez and Linda Dittmar each question Morrison's ability to provide the reader with an answer to the futility of the characters.

Dittmar finds Morrison's metaphors of soil and seasons to be problematic as "it presents racism as an inescapable atavism; and it provides no means of recovery" (Dittmar 140). While I don't find Dittmar to necessarily be wrong in her assessment of the metaphors, they can be better understood by implementing an understanding of the psychological attributes of trauma. While it is true that Morrison offers no clear means of optimism and leaves the reader in a state of ambiguous futility as each critic may say, the detrimental influence of trauma experienced by Morrison's characters is futile in nature and Morrison has no obligation as a writer to provide readers with an answer. To my finding, there are no critics who believe it problematic that Virginia Woolf offers no sign of optimism in the suicidal character of Septimus Smith[1], who happens to suffer from PTSD. There is a cultural empathy with the experience of war that does not exist at the level of the traumatizing effects of racism. The metaphors of soil and seasons, their barrenness and recursive nature as they exist together connectively, may not simply be read as the institution of racism, but the affects of trauma too. Morrison reveals the recursive nature of trauma through the trope of sterile American soil.

"*The Bluest Eye*" commences with two prologues. Each prologue offers the reader a lens through which to view the story. This lens provides the reader of American culture set in the 1930s. Morrison's first prologue is a popular elementary Dick and Jane reading. As they have helped teach whole generations how to read, these books are embedded in American culture. Morrison's use of this rudimentary style of writing offers a subtle complexity. The most evident tactic within this opening prologue is Morrison's use of repetition and arrangement of syntax. These elements coincide. Morrison repeats this prologue three times, changing the syntax each time. The first use provides the reader with a simple and clean reading. It is read in brief child-

[1] Tragic fictional character of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

like sentences. The second repetition removes all punctuation, thus increasing the speed with which the reader follows the words. The final repetition is nearly illegible as Morrison removes all spacing, and blends every word into another one. Morrison's re-arrangement of a seemingly simplistic style of writing creates an element of anxiety for the reader (Morrison 2016):

> "See father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling / see father he is big and strong father will you play with jane father is smiling / seefatherheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefatherissmiling".

The anxiety created by Morrison mimics a disorienting effect found in those suffering from trauma. A significant symptom in diagnosing PTSD is dissociation, which is especially evident in victims of long-term traumatic experiences, as opposed to single event PTSD survivors. Long-term traumatic experiences may include prolonged domestic violence and sexual abuse, torture, or war imprisonment (Kendall-Tackett & Ruglass 2014). Dissociation within those suffering from PTSD varies greatly, but is defined as a psychological process wherein the mind disconnects or separates from bodily experiences, thoughts, feelings, and memories. However, the revision to the DSM-5 in 2013 expands how dissociation is diagnosed (Kendall-Tackett & Ruglass 2014):

> "Individuals who meet PTSD diagnostic criteria and have additional symptoms of dissociation, such as depersonalization (i.e., the experience of feeling disconnected or detached from one's body) or derealization (i.e., the experience of feeling that one's external environment is unreal or hazy), would qualify for this specification. Moreover, for those individuals whose symptoms do not meet full diagnostic criteria until at least 6 months after trauma exposure, a specification of "with delated expression" is allowable" (29).

Dissociation is experienced at varying levels, even in average individuals that find themselves in their cars wondering how they've managed to reach their destination. While that example is a low-level experience of dissociation, compared to rape victims that transcend their bodies as a defense mechanism, it clarifies how dissociation is understood. Morrison's anxiety-inducing arrangement of syntax creates this effect – as the environment in the first repetition becomes a haze in the final repetition, the reader is no longer able to grasp the words and their meaning on the page. Analogous to the reader, Morrison's use of this prologue also has this effect on her characters within the novel.

While the Dick and Jane children's books aided in reading development for decades after the 1930s, they depicted a life obtainable by a homogeneous standard. These books illustrated and romanticized the lives of middle-class white Americans in a soil suitable for their own growth. It was not until 1965 and the Civil Rights movements that these books included African-Americans:

> "The early Dick and Jane books perpetuate the traditional family unit, while the later Dick and Jane books attempt to challenge the traditional ideology of family life, without in fact challenging it all. This attempted challenge was exemplified in 1965 when in the midst of the period known as the Civil Rights Movement, the Dick and Jane books incorporated a black family into the neighbor-hood in an attempt to address the complexities of the American public's desire to idealize untrue family fantasies while also demanding a more diverse view of life. Yet, the diversity was one only of race and not of economic class, as well" (Ward, 2012).

Morrison's use and distortion of this writing not only creates a traumatic effect, but illustrates the inability of her characters to grasp the American dream depicted in Dick and Jane. Morrison

utilizes the distorted version of this opening prologue as chapter headings throughout the novel to portray the contrast between the homogenous middle-class American family and the Breedloves as a representation of the traumatic African-American family experience. Morrison's following prologue expands upon the first by creating a barren environment for the characters within her novel. An environment which heavily and ironically contrasts to the home of Dick and Jane.

Morrison commences the second prologue through the voice of the narrator, Claudia, who at the time, is unnamed. Claudia sets the scene for the reader by reflecting on the fall of 1941, the year there were no marigolds (Morrison 2016):

> "*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did.*"

The reader immediately encounters the barrenness of the soil surrounding the characters with the idea of Dick and Jane fresh in his or her mind. Another contrasting element the reader is met with is the idea of a daughter having her father's baby in this barren land. As the reader continues, the barrenness of the soil becomes even more evident with the death of Pecola's baby (Morrison 2016):

> "*It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that*

> *the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had just dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.*"

Morrison uses the elements of guilt and shame within Claudia and her sister as traumatic symptoms through their experience of a friend having their father's baby. Trauma is not only limited to the first-hand victim, it permeates into witnesses, family and friends (Kendall-Tackett & Ruglass 2014):

> "According to the DSM-IV-TR, a person could be diagnosed with PTSD only if he or she experienced a criterion A stressor, which compromises two components: (1) The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others..."

Claudia's guilt surfaces through her treatment of Pecola and the Breedloves. Claudia was not the only one complicit in this, as she says *we*. The *we* she refers to is her own community. The community surrounding the Breedloves contributes to the already barren environment. While Morrison is certainly using the unyielding soil as a metaphor for the culture of Jim Crow America, she expresses how the African-American community can be complicit in perpetuating its own oppression. Claudia elaborates on this sense of personal guilt in her complicity with her community in the treatment of the Breedloves at the end of the novel, as she describes the aftermath of Pecola's complete dissociation (Morrison 2016):

> "We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her. Our flowers never grew. I was convinced that Frieda was right, that I had planted them too deeply. How could I have been so sloven? So we avoided Pecola Breedlove – forever" (205).

Morrison, however, ends the novel by convicting the American soil of stunting or prohibiting the growth of the African-American community. The sterile American soil creates a dystopian society that preserves and perpetuates the traumatic experiences that transpire throughout the novel. The soil creates an environment which allows for traumatic growth to thrive on its own barrenness (Morrison 2016):

> "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (206).

These final words mirror the prologue, as Morrison returns to the soil in an attempt to remind the reader of *how* the traumatic experiences transpired. In her own words, "*since* why *is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in* how" (Morrison 2016). With the setting of sterile American soil being placed for the reader in the second prologue, and its reoccurrence in the end, the reader can then begin to dissect the psychology of the traumatic experiences of the characters and their community.

The most evident traumatic factor to consider, since it is magnified in the first two prologues and the end of the novel, is the traumatic psychological factor of racism. While trauma is widely perceived by the public as an experience exclusive to individuals surviving horrific events of war and abuse, trauma is also experienced as a communal consciousness. Social class, sexual orientation, gender, religion and race all affect the likelihood of experiencing traumatic stressors and the way in which an individual or group approaches mental health (Erickson 1991):

> "The social environment influences the causes and outcomes of traumatic experience in a variety of ways. It forms the circumstances out of which trauma is created, but it can also provide, or decline, needed supports for healing. Although trauma damages the individual psyche, collective trauma has further destructive consequences in that it breaks the attachments of social life, degrades the sense of community and support from that community, and dominates the mood and interactions of the group" (460-61).

This knowledge of trauma further supports the understanding of Claudia's experience within the collective consciousness of community trauma. Claudia's shame and guilt, pertaining to herself and her community's treatment of Pecola and the Breedloves, is a reflection of collective trauma. This collective trauma mirrors the ineffective and degrading communal support, thus exacerbating the effects of the barren soil the Breedloves grow from. However, Morrison does not, with the exceptions of Cholly's encounter with the two white men in the woods and Maureen Peal, create an abundance of assertive or overpowering white characters as elements of racism. Morrison uses undertones of systemic racism perceived through Claudia's narration of white symbols of beauty as a means to imitate the barren soil (i.e. white baby dolls, Shirley Temple, blue eyes). "Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley" (19); "Adults, older girls, shops,

magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured, 'Here,' they said, 'this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it.'… I could not love it" (20-21); "I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (190). Claudia is a figure of double-consciousness, while she is completely within the community of collective trauma, she is also outside the experience of Pecola. At once outsider and insider, she illustrates to an extent, the reader's position as an engaged yet separate witness (Vickroy 2002). Claudia's role as this 'neither here nor there' figure is no doubt an allusion to Du Bois' double-consciousness (Du Bois 1996):

> "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warning ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (5).

Morrison embodies this idea within Claudia as a way of offering the reader a veil of their own. Claudia allows the reader to empathize through this veil with her own shame and guilt. Other characters within the community epitomize more harshly the self-oppressive behavior and repression of their own insecurities surrounding their blackness through their treatment of the Breedloves.

The 'uniquely' and 'aggressively' ugly Breedloves, as described to the reader, are quarantined from within their own community. As aforementioned, the community is immensely significant in the rehabilitation of trauma victims. The encounters the Breedloves are faced with against their own community play a destructive role in their healing process, thus furthering the decaying effects of trauma. However, these effects do not cease at the Breedloves. Morrison's portrayal of this community that hinders the Breedloves from coping with trauma displays the self-hatred and eventual collapse of community that perpetuates oppression. The reader encounters this communal self-hatred early within the novel as Pecola finds herself surrounded by harassing boys (Morrison 2016):

> '"Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleep nekked. Black e mo …' They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control over: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn" (65).

Morrison's depiction of shame and self-denigration projected by school boys entails how the trauma of systemic oppression becomes recursive and spills into the collective consciousness of particular communities. The reader understands these actions not simply as children being obnoxious, but realizes these are habits that are internalized through their homes and community. Geraldine is a prime example of how these ideas of shame and self-humiliation become internalized and ultimately project upon others like the Breedloves (Morrison 2016):

> "He hated to see the swings, slides, monkey bars, and seesaws empty and tried to get kids to stick around as long as possible. White kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group" (87).

Here, Geraldine's son, Junior, has learned the idea of "nigger" to be synonymous exclusively with blackness. As if being loud and dirty does not encompass nearly all children on a playground, including those that are white. Geraldine further expresses her own internalized hatred in her reaction to finding Pecola in her home as Junior tortured her and held her prisoner in his own little game, "She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks … She saw the safety pin holding the dress up … She had seen this girl all her life" (91); "They were everywhere … They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded into pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children" (92); "'Get out,' she said, her voice quiet. 'You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house'" (92). The relationship between Geraldine, Junior, and Pecola is a representation of the recursive nature of systemic oppression and its traumatizing effects. This micro relationship, accompanied with the macro relationship of American soil, the community, and the Breedloves mirrors Morrison's structure of the novel. Along with the section headings taken from the accelerated prologue, Morrison also separates the novel in parts headed by seasons. This use of seasons is symbolic of an uncontrollable sense of recurrent nature discernable within the African-American community and the American soil. These moments of recursive repression are not exclusively projected upon the Breedloves by their outside community, but also occur between each other.

The Breedloves' home reflects their outside environment as the hatred projected upon them is spread amongst one another. The heads of the household, Pauline and drunken Cholly, create a house of violence that detrimentally affects their children's growth, particularly Pecola's (Morrison 2016):

> "She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact … Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tacitly they agreed not to kill each other" (43).

Ongoing domestic violence creates a toxic environment for children. Witnessing traumatic violence between parents that are thought to be protective agents erodes the child's sense of safety and idea of family structure. The child's home no longer functions as a haven (Herman, 2015):

> "Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation … Unable to care for or protect herself, she must compensate for the failures of adult care and protection with the only means at her disposal, an immature system of psychological defenses" (96).

Unlike Sammy, Pecola's brother, Pecola does not have the ability to flee from her violent parents. Because children are so dependent on their parents and family structure as a means of survival, they are consequently, held captive. Although they are not bound by chains, they are bound by their inability to care for themselves. This creates a traumatic captive dynamic between

Pecola and her parents. The same dynamic may also be applied to the relationship between Pauline and Cholly, given her dependence as a woman on him "Women and children are not ordinarily chained, though even this occurs more often than one might think. The barriers to escape are generally invisible. They are nonetheless extremely powerful. Children are rendered captive by their condition of dependency. Women are rendered captive by economic, social, psychological, and legal subordination, as well as by physical force" (Herman 2015). Pecola's reaction to this captivity is obviously grave (Morrison 2016):

> "Pecola, on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance. Though the methods varied, the pain was consistent as it was deep. She struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die" (43).

The methods of endurance Pecola practices exemplify one of the foundational defense mechanisms in response to trauma the human body has designed. It becomes evident to the reader that she attempts to become completely dissociated from her body in these moments of violence, "'Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. 'Please make me disappear.' She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away" (45). The use of this traumatic dissociation occurs when a victim finds themselves in a situation where they are unable to 'fight or flight'. Pecola's inability to do either renders her to this state of dissociative transcendence in order to cope with her environment. Pecola's psychological state further erodes to the point of complete and uncontrollable dissociation by the end of the novel. However, it is necessary to first delve into the brutal lives of her parents to obtain a more sensible understanding of how trauma seeps through the Breedloves in a recursive manner.

Pauline Breedlove, similarly to her daughter Pecola, is deeply concerned with how she is perceived by others and the nature of beauty. Morrison certainly makes this no coincidence as the mother-daughter relationship mirrors the recursive nature of internalized self-hatred within the African-American community. However, Pauline is a unique character even within her community and home. While the Breedloves are uniquely ugly, Pauline's ugliness is exaggerated into the grotesque. She is described as having a lame foot and eventually loses a rotten tooth which becomes the demise of her self-care. Pauline's lame foot creates a distance between her and her family as it isolates her in her growth as a teen, "Slight as it was, this deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done … why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged any place. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (111). Analogous to how the outside community treats the Breedloves as a whole, Pauline's family does the same in response to her deformity. This physical deformation may be read as a manifestation of what it means to be black within the environment Morrison depicts. Not only being isolated from white beauty standards, she becomes a representation of what others within her own community want to distance themselves from being. However, it is not her lame foot that impedes her in her adult life, it is the loss of her rotten tooth.

Pauline's sole moments of happiness during her abusive relationship with Cholly occur at the movies. It is here where she idolizes the idealized American family, "White men taking good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses … Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard" (123). The films portrayed a life similar to the Dick and Jane books in the prologue, identical to the reader's

understanding of the blurred text, Pauline is incapable of grasping the life before her eyes. Although the futility does not come to the forefront of her mind until she loses her rotten tooth "I remember one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I'd seen hers on a magazine … it pulled my tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head. I don't believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then" (123). Pauline's inability to ever capture the beauty glamorized in figures like Jean Harlow waters a seed of shame buried within her that grows rapidly in reaction to her lost tooth. Although Pauline mentions in her own narration that she had not a rotten tooth in her head, the reader may recall from a separate narration that the tooth had been rotten since the marriage between her and Cholly, "And then she lost her front tooth. But there must have been a speck, a brown speck easily mistaken for food but which did not leave, which sat on the enamel for months, and grew, until it cut into the surface and then to the brown putty underneath, finally eating away to the root … The weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure … But even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first place" (116). The extended metaphor Morrison uses here imitates the metaphor of marigolds and the soil. The condition being alluded to is analogous to the barren soil that perpetuates the traumatic moments of domestic violence and feelings of shame Pauline experiences in her relationship with Cholly and to an environment that does not recognize her as beautiful, which ultimately seeps into Pecola. The loss of her tooth also signifies the death of her relationship with Cholly, as she had always dreamed of a life different than what her marriage provided (Saunders 2012). It then becomes evident to the reader that the condition of their marriage permeates through their children's

growth. Morrison's use of this recursive nature of trauma as an omnipresent effect in the African-American community becomes bolstered further as the reader learns of Cholly's development as a man.

While Morrison's use of her nearly illegible version of Dick and Jane as chapter headings occurs throughout the entirety of the novel as an antithesis to the lives of her characters, none appear to be more polarizing than Cholly Breedlove's. The strength and inviting smile depicted in the father of Dick and Jane is starkly contrasted with Cholly's feebleness and futility, "When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (132). Cholly, like Pauline and Pecola, is at the receiving end of a fate he has no power over. Again, Morrison drills the reader with an ever present recursive nature of trauma through Cholly's character. He struggles early with identity and shame through his yearning for his father. It is evident in the following scene of Cholly reflecting on an image of a black father holding his child up in the air in celebration, "He wondered if God looked like that. No. God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes … It must be the devil who looks like that – holding the world in his hands, ready to dash it to the ground and spill the red guts so niggers could eat the sweet, warm insides. If the devil did look like that, Cholly preferred him. He never felt anything thinking about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him" (134). Cholly's understanding of God is smeared by his own development as a child without a father. It is widely understood in the realm of psychoanalysis that the loss of a father can vastly harm a child's development, whether directly or indirectly, as it also impacts the mother's ability to fully nurse her child. The latter is clearly evident in the case of Cholly, as he was only an infant when dropped into garbage. The effects of this can disrupt gratification/frustration rhythm. This alteration in

attachment may then lead to impaired development of self and object differentiation, reality testing, frustration-tolerance and the capacity for basic trust and confidence, and disrupt the proceeding tasks of separation-individuation (Jones 2007). Cholly's only parental figure came in the form of his Aunt Jimmy, who died early in his childhood. Cholly, only a child suffering already from his absent biological parents, could not even register the death of this only loving figure in his life. His development of apathy towards the situation can be understood as a symptom of trauma, as it is a defense mechanism that allows him to continue his survival without having to be hindered by emotional decay. He only registers the death later at the banquet for his aunt when Darlene mentions to him that she would be whooped for getting her dress dirty, "Suddenly he realized that Aunt Jimmy was dead, for he missed the fear of being whipped" (146). Morrison doesn't include any notion of tenderness that he misses to highlight Cholly's interpretation of love and his need for any hint guardianship. At this moment of realization Morrison leads the reader to Cholly's height of trauma that which was hinted at earlier in the novel without giving the context of the situation for the reader.

While at the same event commemorating Aunt Jimmy, Cholly finds himself in the woods with Darlene, described as a cousin, although there are doubts of Cholly's familial lineage. Cholly and Darlene, after straying from the other group of kids in the midst of their playful game, flirtatiously fall upon each other and have naïve sexual intercourse for what seems to be, at least for Cholly, the first time. However, his sexual climax was interrupted by two white men armed with guns, "'Get on wid it, nigger,' said the flashlight one … With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear … Cholly began to simulate what had gone on before" (148). Cholly, a young black boy faced against the threat of two white men with the power over his life and Darlene's, has no power in this moment and is at

the height of futility and trauma as his life is threatened during his utmost state of vulnerability. Cholly then develops an intense hatred for the girl beneath him, "He hated her. He almost wished he could do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much" (148). Corresponding with the nature of trauma, this moment reoccurs during his daily chores and brings back this inflamed hatred for Darlene. This hatred is Cholly's way of coping with the trauma, for his hatred truly lies within the white men and in himself for his inability to take control and protect Darlene (Morrison 2016):

> "Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess – that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal … The loathing that galloped through him made him tremble. There was no one to talk to" (150-151).

Cholly's further inability to communicate this traumatic event exacerbates the feelings of hatred and shame that plague him. These symptomatic sores fester throughout his growth as a man and make themselves prevalent in his marriage with Pauline. Not only are they evident in the obvious form of domestic violence but in their sex life too, as even that is described as violent. The inability for trauma victims to communicate their experiences is deleterious to their rehabilitation. Victims of trauma rely on family, friends and communal relationships in order to feel safe in expressing their experience. Unfortunately for Cholly, his only means of support and safety died along with Aunt Jimmy.

The aftermath of his aunt's death led him in search of his father, Samson Fuller. Morrison stresses the importance of familial relationships and especially the father figure for Cholly's

character. As mentioned, the father figure has an immense effect on how the family unit functions. In Cholly's case, his absent father led to a mother who could no longer care for her child thus leading to Cholly's place in the trash. The anxiety filled meeting with his father leaves Cholly completely deflated as he defecates himself, "So he sat in the dripping honey sun, pulling every nerve and muscle into service to stop the fall of water from his eyes. While straining in this way, focusing every erg of energy on his eyes, his bowels suddenly opened up, and before he could realize what he knew, liquid stools were running down his legs" (157). This moment of defecation represents exactly what repression of trauma may do to an individual. The reader realizes in this moment all that Cholly has repressed before his journey to his father. His repression of his own condition of being a black boy abandoned in the trash, accompanied with his aunt's death and feeling powerless in his most vulnerable state with Darlene have all festered to this moment of defecation. The reader encounters earlier on his boarding of the bus to Macon, where his father is, that Cholly was "rigid with constipation" (153). This is an early signifier of Cholly's inability to repress his trauma, just as his inability to build a levee for his tears releases all feces of his trauma. Cholly retreats into himself after this moment of rock-bottom, like a wounded animal – isolated and on the brink of death. However, he was saved physically, yet never does he heal his wounds of trauma which elevates him into a hollow but free man (Morrison 2016):

> "Dangerously free … He was free to drink himself into a silly helplessness … there was nothing to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him. It was in this godlike state that he met Pauline Williams" (159-160).

Morrison leads the reader to Pauline at this moment in order to connect the earlier understanding of Cholly and Pauline's abusive relationship. Again, Morrison bolsters the recursive nature of

trauma. She continues this motif as she pushes time forward to Cholly's rape of his daughter Pecola Breedlove.

As Cholly finds his daughter at the sink washing dishes he is overwrought with myriad sensations and thoughts; "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence" (161). Cholly drowns in this wave of different emotions and becomes violent in thought; "Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child – unburdened – why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet" (161). Cholly's perception of his daughter is just as of himself as a child, a futile and miserable black body. He receives her misery as a fault of his own and rises a sensation of guilt within him. This guilt is rooted in his futility in the moment of sexual vulnerability with Darlene in his inability to protect her and himself. His sensation of impotence then continues in this moment as he questions what he is able to do to make his daughter happy. These sensations come to a halt once Cholly sees his daughter imitate the moment he met Pauline with her rubbing of her foot against her calf; "It was such a small gesture, but it filled him then with a wondering softness" (162). Cholly then commences to get on all fours, animalistic in nature, as he proceeds to rape his daughter with thoughts of Pauline flooding his mind (Morrison, 2016):

> "The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her – tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made

> – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon" (163).

Morrison's explicit depiction of rape provides an understanding of Cholly's projection of his own trauma into his daughter. Pecola in this scene is inaudible except for a gasp as she loses all consciousness. It is very common for rape victims to faint or have an out of body experience during such a traumatic moment as this dissociation is a defense mechanism; "When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender. The system of self-defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her own situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness" (Herman, 2015); "A rape survivor describes this detached state: 'I left my body at that point. I was over next to the bed, watching what was happening to me'" (Herman 2015). Although Pecola doesn't have this out of body experience, her reaction to rape is a complete state of unconsciousness. When she regains consciousness, it is as if she has no recollection of her father raping her; "She was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her" (163). Commonly, rape victims in this state may not recall the traumatic event until as late as weeks afterwards. Pecola's reaction is extremely in line with many rape experiences. However, at this moment, the reader may question – why incest?

Morrison's use of incest, rather than rape by another character in the novel, is monumentally important to the reader's understanding of Pecola. Incest victims, compared to non-incestuous rape victims, are more prone to developing PTSD, experiencing dissociative disorders, agoraphobia, and low self-esteem (Darves-Bornoz, Jean-Michel, et al. 1999). Morrison's depiction of Pecola in the aftermath of this event exemplifies the dissociative and

self-esteem lowering effects incestuous rape causes an individual. Pecola, only a girl of eleven, is also entirely dependent on her parents to survive. As mentioned, this mirrors a state of captivity, thus not allowing for Pecola to confront the traumatizing event that took place. Unable to escape or confront her condition, Pecola falls into a deep state of dissociation. Morrison is suggesting, through Pecola's character, not only again the recursive nature of trauma, but specifically trauma that plagues the black community. Morrison exemplifies this through Pecola's obsession with having blue eyes after being raped. While Pecola showed examples, like her mother, of having low self-esteem and struggling with her perception of beauty coinciding with blackness, the trauma she suffers at the hands of her father amplifies these feelings.

The final chapter heading depicts Morrison's accelerated version of Jane and a friend. The irony in this, as the reader realizes, is that Pecola in this final chapter is not speaking to a friend but a split identity she has created. In her delusion that she was granted blue eyes she created a separate self in order to share with someone the enjoyment of her fulfillment. However, this fulfillment is hollow in that preceding the rape her fixation with having blue eyes reflects her self-blame for the experience and her complete annihilation of self-esteem, or self at all. This extreme personality split Pecola develops at the result of her empty fulfillment and trauma is not unfounded. Although most cases of trauma do not lead to utter personality split, it does happen and is more likely found in chronically abused children; "Under the most extreme conditions of early, severe, and prolonged abuse, some children, perhaps those already endowed with strong capacities for trance states, begin to form separated personality fragments with their own names, psychological functions, and sequestered memories" (Herman 2015). Pecola, already being in a condition of helplessness as a young black girl born as a Breedlove, loses all sense of identity and reality at the height of her trauma. Of course, dissociative symptoms are defense mechanism

of the mind, and this fantasy of another self creates a world in which she is able to cope. This coping protects Pecola from her trauma and her relationship with her mother following the aftermath, "Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all the time. Do you suppose she's jealous too? *Could be. They are pretty, you know*" (195). However, the reader understands this relationship between Pauline and Pecola is not ruined by this false idea of obtaining blue eyes, but rather Pauline's own shame and disgust with her daughter becoming pregnant by means of her husband. Pecola's continuous conversation with this split identity she created allows for her to share a second time Cholly raped her and her inability to gain any support from her mother. This split identity character pokes fun at her and hints at a demented enjoyment of the second experience. However, the hypothesis that, on the basis of positive feelings, children have also desired incestuous activity, cannot be upheld (Affeld-Niemeyer, Petra, et al. 1995). Pecola's coping mechanism does not only allow her to live in the presence of her mother, but with others in the community as well, "Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off. *Is that why nobody has told you how pretty they are?*" (195). Others in the community divert their eyes from Pecola not because of jealousy but they see their own shame within her and everything they detest about themselves, just as Geraldine expressed earlier in the novel about the Breedloves as a whole. Pecola's dissociation protects her from herself, her family, the unsupportive community, and the unyielding soil that didn't allow for her growth. This form of dissociative defense is Pecola's only means of survival in the barren ground she and her family rose from.

Morrison's image of the Breedloves as a representation of recursive trauma in the African American community illuminates the experiences of rape, incest, domestic violence, and systemic racism which all find their roots in sterile American soil. The self-oppressive behavior

demonstrated by the outer community through its own detestation for its identities is exposed by Morrison. Through the illumination of these traumatic experiences, "*The Bluest Eye*" sheds light on the myriad psychological symptoms that are expressed by victims of trauma. This novel exemplifies the function of trauma narratives in society as it raises a lens to the reader in which they can view the traumatic experiences of individuals outside their own identity or observed by readers alike to the characters in the novel to comprehend their own experiences.

Affeld-Niemeyer, Petra, et al. "TRAUMA and SYMBOL: Instinct and Reality Perception in Therapeutic Work with Victims of Incest." *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, vol. 40, no. 1, Jan. 1995, p. 23.

This work helps address Pecola's ambiguous enjoyment of her second rape experience.

Darves-Bornoz, Jean-Michel, et al. "Similarities and Differences between Incestuous and Nonincestuous Rape in a French Follow-Up Study." *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 12, no. 4, Oct. 1999, p. 613.

A study of 102 rape survivors attempt to address the psychological differences between incestuous and non-incestuous rape. This study aids in the readers understanding of why Morrison would choose incest as a scene in her novel.

Dittmar, Linda. "'Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" The Politics of Form in 'The Bluest Eye.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1990, pp. 137–155. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1345735.

While I agree with Dittmar's overall assessment of the novel, her analyzation of the metaphors of soil and seasons can be better understood through Morrison's descriptive trauma. The psychological aspects of trauma make the futility of Morrison's characters more acceptable for the reader.

Du Bois, W.E.B., and Monica M. Elbert. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Penguin, 1996.

Claudia's function as a Du Bois-ian double-consciousness figure works both in the original sense of the definition and the dynamic of her character as a witness to Pecola's trauma. This double-consciousness creates a similar effect on the reader as the reader follows the experiences of the

Breedloves. This depth in Claudia's character aids the role of trauma narratives in the world of fiction as it creates a close understanding and builds empathy on behalf of the reader.

Erickson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *American Imago.* 48.4, 1991, pp. 455-71.

Erickson's excerpt on the importance of community in the role of trauma highlights how detrimental a harmful community like the Breedloves find themselves in can be to people afflicted by trauma. This role of community also branches out to American society's part in hurting/healing sub-communities experiencing greater risks of trauma.

Hardy, Kenneth V. "Healing the Hidden Wounds of Racial Trauma." *Reclaiming Children & Youth*, vol. 22, no. 1, Spring 2013, pp. 24-28.

Hardy discusses the disproportionate number of racial trauma related wounds experienced by children of color. Examined further is internalized self-hatred, loss of identity, and the impact of racial story-telling and narratives.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 2015.

A cornerstone piece of literature in understanding trauma through social contexts and through the frame of feminism. Herman examines the psychological impacts traumatic rape, domestic abuse, war, violent, colonized and oppressive experiences. This text significantly aids in understanding the various elements of trauma within Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, as the experiences witnessed by the reader are through a greater social context. Herman's sections on captivity and child abuse are key to this work's examination into the Breedlove family.

Jones, Kim A. "Assessing the Impact of Father-Absence from a Psychoanalytic Perspective." *Psychoanalytic Social Work,* vol. 14, no. 1, Mar. 2007, pp. 43-58.

This assessment helps address Cholly's psychological development as a child and his adult relationship with his wife and daughter.

Kendall-Tackett, Kathleen A., and Lesia M. Ruglass. *Psychology of Trauma 101*. Springer Publishing Company, 2014.

A foundational piece to this work as it aids in understanding the technical aspects of PTSD such as: symptoms, clinical diagnosis, what qualifies as a traumatic experience, and the steps to recovery.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Books, 2016.

The contemporary American writer, Toni Morrison, utilizes the African American experience throughout her works to bridge the gap between the reader and the subject's experiences. Toni Morrison's "*The Bluest Eye*" depicts a myriad of African American trauma experiences through the scope of oppressive American soil. Within this novel, Morrison surveys the traumatic experiences of domestic violence, incestuous rape, and systemic racism. The effects and signs of trauma are not limited to the specific traumatic events that transpire within the novel, but they transcend beyond their momentary occurrence and project into Morrison's prose, her characters, and societal structures.

Morrison addresses self-oppressive behavior of the outer community as a result of their own detestation for their identities. Through the illumination of these traumatic experiences, "*The Bluest Eye*" sheds light on the myriad of psychological symptoms that are expressed through victims of trauma. This novel exemplifies the function of trauma narratives in society as

it raises a lens to the reader in which they can view the traumatic experiences of individuals outside their own identity, or be used by readers alike to the characters in the novel to comprehend their own experiences.

Saunders, James Robert. "Why Losing a Tooth Matters: Shirley Jackson's "The Tooth" and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" *Midwest Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 2, Winter 2012, pp. 193-204.

Saunders' journal clarifies the depth Pauline Breedlove offers the reader as a character. His examination of an intertextual reference to Shirley Jackson's *The Tooth* helps readers understand the significance of physical deformations of characters among literature. Saunders' examination of Pauline's lost tooth offers an interpretation of the death of her marriage to Cholly.

Vickroy, Laurie. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. University of Virginia Press, 2002.

Vickroy discusses the representations of trauma in contemporary fiction and its effects on the reader. She also examines the role trauma narratives play in healing and understanding trauma while looking through the scope of social contexts in reference to Judith Herman. Vickroy examines at length Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, delving into the role that racism plays in effecting the characters' psychology and the perpetuation of trauma through the Breedlove's community. Also examined are other works by Morrison that reflect the role of trauma in *The Bluest Eye*.

Vickroy, Laurie. "The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, June 1996, p. 91.

This journal approaches Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* through Pecola's traumatization. Vickroy explores the traumatic effects of colonialism in the 20th century as it disempowers cultures. Vickroy's examination focuses particularly on Pecola's loss of innocence through an oppressive environment.

Vásquez, Sam. "In Her Own Image: Literary and Visual Representations of Girlhood in Toni Morrison's the Bluest Eye and Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 12, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 58-87. EBSCO*host*, doi:10.2979/meridians.12.1.58.

Vásquez, like Dittmar, has trouble with the ambiguity and futility that Morrison depicts. Again, he does not implement an understanding of psychological trauma, which helps elucidate the hopelessness of Morrison's characters.

Ward, Jervette R. "In Search of Diversity: Dick and Jane and Their Black Playmates." *Making Connections: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity*, vol. 13, no. 2, Spring 2012, pp. 17-26.

Ward's work on the relation of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Dick and Jane children's books creates interpretive depth to Morrison's opening prologue. Ward analyzes the racial history of Dick and Jane books and their representation of non-inclusive American culture.